Fasting *on the* Day *of* ʿĀshūrāʾ

According to the Books of the Twelver Shīʿah

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اللهم صلى وسلم على خاتم النبيين

رحمة للعالمين وآله الطيبين الطاهرين

Notwithstanding the small amount of rather technical controversy over the details surrounding—and the legal ruling on—fasting on and around the tenth day of the first Islamic lunar month, an overwhelming majority of the religious community of God's Final Messenger ﷺ nevertheless observes said fasts.

The precedent proof-texts and reasonings employed by the Generality are largely well known, but what have the prominent voices from among the Twelver Shīʿī school of thought had to say on the matter? Hereunder, with God's permission, I have presented a cursory look at just that.

However, before presenting the coming references and opinions, it is important that I establish the objective of doing so. It is commonly asserted by many (not all) of the adherents of the Twelver Shīʿī school of thought that fasting on the Day of ʿĀshūrā' is one or a combination of:

- A forbidden, reprehensible practice;
- Non-existent in the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ or the practice of the Imāms of Ahl al-Bayt;
- A practice of the Nawāṣib (anti-ʿĀlids);
- Forged by the Umayyads in order to distract the Muslims from the tragedy of Karbalā';
- *Et cetera.*

I hope to clarify these accusations as being false notions by presenting what follows.

Shaykh al-Ṭūsī recorded in *Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām* (4/29) and *al-Istibṣar* (2/134), as did Shaykh al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī in *Wasā'il al-Shīʿah* (7/377) and others, the narration on the authority of Abū al-Ḥasan ﷺ, who said:

"The Messenger of Allāh ﷺ fasted on the day of ʿĀshūrā'."

Also recorded in *Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām* (4/300), *al-Istibṣar* (2/134), *al-Ḥadā'iq al-Nāḍirah* by Shaykh Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī (13/371), and others, is the narration from Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq ﷺ from his father, Muḥammad al-Bāqir ﷺ, who said:

"Fasting the day of ʿĀshūrā' expiates the sins of a year."

Another narration, which can be found in *Wasā'il al-Shīʿah* (7/347) and *al-Ḥadā'iq al-Nāḍirah* (13/377), is attributed to Imām al-Ṣādiq ﷺ, who said:

"Whoever is able to fast in Muḥarram should do so, for his fast will protect him from every sin."

A narration, recorded by al-Ṭabarsī in *Mustadrak al-Wasā'il* (1/594), is attributed to Imām ʿAlī ﷺ, who said:

"Fast on the day of ʿĀshūrā', both the ninth and the tenth, for it is an expiation of the previous year's sins. If any of you eats without knowing it [i.e., by mistake], he should continue his fast."

One of most influential Twelver scholars and predecessor to Āyatullāh ʿAlī al-Sīstānī—the spiritual leader of much of the Shīʿah world in the late 20th century—Āyatullāh Abū al-Qāsim al-Khoei, stated:

> As for the narrations that command and encourage the fast on this day [ʿĀshūrā'], they are plenty—such as the authentic narration of al-Qaddāḥ from Abū ʿAbdillāh [Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq], from his father, Abū Jaʿfar, who said, "fasting on the day of ʿĀshūrā' is an expiation of the year's sins," as well as the reliable transmission of Masʿadah b. Ṣadaqah from Abū ʿAbdillāh, who said that Imām ʿAlī said, "fast on ʿĀshūrā', the ninth and tenth, for indeed it expiates the sins of the year."[1]

[1] *Al-Mustanad fī Sharḥ al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqā*, vol. 12, "Chapter on Fasting"

Shaykh al-Khoei went on to say that the narrations that affirm the fast on ʿĀshūrāʾ are numerous, and that the prohibitive narrations are all weak in their chains of transmission. He says that the *karāhah* (the state of being *makrūh*/disliked) of fasting on that day is not established, let alone is its prohibition, which was the view of al-Baḥrānī in *al-Ḥadāʾiq*.

Shaykh al-Khoei further said, "rather, it is permissible and recommended, especially [if done] mournfully according to what you know [i.e. for Karbalāʾ] with nothing else added to it."[2] He also added:

> Whatever the case may be, the narrations that prohibit [fasting on ʿĀshūrāʾ] are not authentic by their chains whatsoever, but rather they are all weak, and we do not have any authentic narration upon which we can rely on to show [theological] opponents that the fasting was done upon *taqiyyah*, as the author of *al-Ḥadāʾiq* tried to produce.[3]

In his *al-Muqniʿah* (1/366), Shaykh al-Mufīd stated:

> As for the one who is capable of doing so, they should fast on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, and the three "white days," i.e., the 13th, 14th, and 15th of each month—and indeed, they have been dubbed as "white" because of the brightness of the moon from sunset until sunrise over that three-day period. One should also fast the six days of Shawwāl after ʿĪd al-Fiṭr, as well as on the day of ʿArafah—whomsoever is not physically harmed by doing so. And the day of ʿĀshūrāʾ should be fasted on out of sorrow for the tragedy that befell the Family of Muḥammad, upon them be peace.

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

Listing the appropriate days upon which one should fast in his *al-Mabsūṭ fī Fiqh al-Imāmiyyah* (1/282), Shaykh al-Ṭūsī also included "the fast of the Day of ʿĀshūrā', to be observed out of calamity and grief."

In *al-Sarā'ir al-Ḥāwī li-Taḥrīr al-Fatāwī* (1/419), Shaykh Ibn Idrīs al-Ḥillī mentions, when listing appropriate days for Muslims to fast, "the fast of the Day of ʿĀshūrā', to be observed out of grief for the calamities of the Family of the Prophet, upon them be peace."

Shaykh al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī also mentions, when listing days upon which to observe a fast, that "the fast of ʿĀshūrā' is to be observed out of sorrow" (*Shrā'i' al-Islām*, 1/154).

Furthermore, in *al-Muʿtabar fī Sharḥ al-Mukhtaṣar* (2/709), al-Muḥaqqiq al-Ḥillī explains that:

> The fast of ʿĀshūrā' being observed out of grief, and not for seeking rewards/blessings, is firstly proven by what Hārūn b. Masʿadah b. Ṣadaqah narrated on the authority of Abū ʿAbdillāh ﷺ from his father, i.e., that ʿAlī ﷺ said, "the fast of the ninth and tenth [of Muḥarram] expiates the sins of the previous year." [Something similar is narrated] from ʿAbdullāh b. Maymūn al-Qaddāḥ, from Jaʿfar, from his father ﷺ.

Moreover, al-ʿAllāmah al-Ḥillī included in his *Tadhkirah al-Fuqahā'* (6/192):

> Issue 129—It is recommended to fast on the Day of ʿĀshūrā' out of grief, not out of seeking reward, because it is the day on which one of Masters of the Youth of the People of Paradise, al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī ﷺ, was martyred, his harem was violated, and the greatest of calamities befell the Ahl al-Bayt, upon them be peace. Therefore, grieving should be done by not eating and retreating [i.e., refraining from social gathering].

One may agree or disagree with Shaykh al-Khoei; however, the precedent in the scholarship stands. He himself weakens the narrations that prohibit fasting on ʿĀshūrā' and that condemn those who do fast it. The point here is, with the precedent set for *ikhtilāf* (a difference of opinion; in this case, on the act itself rather than its origin), then why definitively condemn it and exhibit characteristics of fanaticism on a condemnatory opinion based on inauthentic reports?

Why is this relevant?

I personally do not believe that the fast of ʿĀshūrā' was done by the Prophet ﷺ due to emulation of, learning from, honoring, etc. Banī Isrā'īl, the Yahūd of Madīnah, the Exodus, Prophet Mūsā ؑ, etc., nor do I think it was a practice from the Age of Ignorance that the Prophet ﷺ continued. However, I cannot simply deny the plethora of narrations that have been transmitted establishing its precedent (simply as an act of worship, not necessarily those about its cause/reason/origin). In addition to these is the authentic narration from Ibn al-ʿAbbās that tells us that the fast of ʿĀshūrā' was observed only *once* by the Prophet ﷺ, and that was in the final year of his life. When combined with another authentic narration—that the Prophet ﷺ was also informed, in that same year, about the future martyrdom of his grandson, Imām al-Ḥusayn ؑ—a valid opinion about this particular fast is that the Prophet's ﷺ observance of it in that final Muḥarram was done out of empathy for the pain and thirst of his dear Ḥusayn ؑ.

Therefore, those who assert that the simple act of fasting on this day is prohibited, a reprehensible innovation of the Nawāṣib, rivals the practice of Ahl al-Bayt, or mocks Imām al-Ḥusayn ؑ and Karbalā', are asserting such without knowledge or the academic nuance and transparency/honesty that is required in discourse on religious texts and acts of worship. For one, no act of worship will ever—or should ever—distract an awakened Muslim from the school and movement of the Ahl al-

Bayt. If one's objection is over the Ummah's distraction from Imām al-Ḥusayn's ﷺ tragedy, then one should focus on raising that awareness without resorting to less-than-thorough, loose-cannon attacks on the act itself. Perhaps a criticism of what is considered its origin, if done academically, can be discussed (by specialists). Similarly, those who observe the fast should not fool themselves into marginalizing the martyrdom of Imām al-Ḥusayn ﷺ by intending to celebrate a "new year" or the Exodus, for the fast itself is not mutually exclusive of, and should never overshadow, the Tragedy of Karbalā'.

و صلى الله و سلم و بارك على سيدنا محمد و آله

All Praise is to Allāh ﷻ, and He Knows Best.